

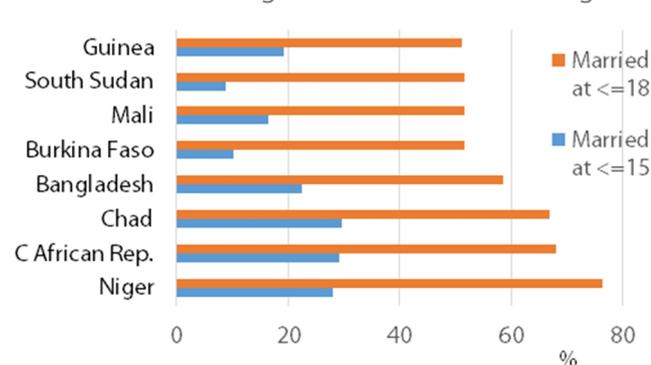
## Child marriages: Still too many

Although the official age of adulthood varies across countries, several international conventions, in line with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which has been signed by 140 states, apply the definition of 'child marriage' to any couple where at least one member – usually the girl – is aged under 18. The practice of child marriage challenges both children's rights and gender equality, and exposes child brides to serious abuses and health risks. Child wives drop out of school and have little access to economic resources, which hinders potential development opportunities for their community. The European Union not only constantly condemns child marriage but also endeavours to tackle this practice through targeted aid programmes. The European Parliament will again voice its concerns about the issue during the European Development Days 2018.

### Child marriage in figures

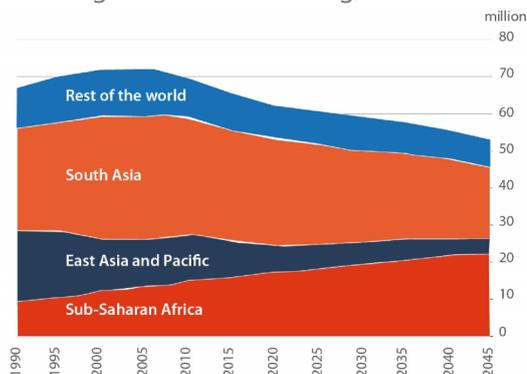
Child marriages occur in a wide range of cultural backgrounds, mainly in developing countries. Most typically they involve a union between a young girl and a male adult, at times as soon as she starts puberty. [Marrying off boys](#) is very rare. Even though only the [most dramatic cases](#) of child marriage hit the news, the numbers speak for themselves: [650 million women and girls](#) living in the world have been married before 18. Globally, this affects one in five women; the rate is even higher (40 %) in the least developed countries. Depending on local cultural traditions, child marriages are legally or religiously consecrated, or are simply acknowledged by the community. In the absence of a reliable census on the number of child marriages, [statistics](#) are collected by [Unicef](#)- and [USAID](#)-supported surveys. They show that, while the phenomenon is in decline across the world, it still affects around 12 million girls each year. The decrease is mainly visible in south Asia (where the majority of cases still occur); in sub-Saharan Africa, the rate of child marriages is slowly decreasing, but not enough to offset the fast demographic growth, which means that the absolute number of child marriages in the region will continue to increase.

Countries with the highest rates of child marriage



Percentage of 20-24 year-old women who were married or in union before they were 18 years old; most recent year in the 2010-2017 period. Data source: [Unicef](#), 2018

Child marriage rates are declining, but not enough



Number (in millions) of 20-24 year-old women married or in union before 18 years of age, if observed decline continues. Source: [Unicef](#), 2014.

### Why child marriage happens and why it should not happen

While the [reasons](#) for child marriage vary, they are often interlinked. In some places, this traditional practice is not questioned, as it is assumed it addresses other concerns. For instance, marrying off a young daughter relieves her parents of having to feed her, even though giving a dowry might stretch their budget. Marriage also consolidates solidarity between families. In countries afflicted by violence or conflict, marriage can be considered a means of protecting a girl against aggression. Early marriage also prevents the risks of extramarital pregnancy. Whether permitted by law or customary provisions and whether religiously blessed or socially admitted, child marriage is always an abuse of children's rights. It may be based on the free will of the bride to earn the right to have sexual relations, but is frequently arranged between families against

her free will. Societies where child marriages take place are often marked by strong gender inequality; furthermore, this phenomenon is accompanied by other abuses or forms of discrimination: [de-schooling](#) of girls, male-only [land-ownership rights](#), restricted or no access of women to the job market, lack of access to [family planning](#), and in some cases female genital mutilation ([FGM](#)) and [human trafficking](#).

Early marriage involves risks and missed opportunities. Because of their [lack of physical and psychological maturity](#), child wives are more exposed to domestic violence, sexually transmitted diseases, high-risk pregnancy and infant mortality. Additionally, dropping out of school and being denied the prospect of getting a job not only deprives girls of the right to make their own decisions, but is also an ill-advised choice for the community. Indeed, research has shown that [better education](#), higher participation in the economy and greater [control over resources](#) by women has positive effects on agricultural yields, children's health and schooling, and community resilience. A [study](#) by the World Bank and the International Center for Research on Women estimates that ending child marriage would bring a global gain of [US\\$4 trillion](#) by 2030, thanks to its combined impact on population growth, health, education, earnings and decision-making.

## International approach

The legal basis for prohibiting child marriage is provided for in [international law](#), notably the UN [Convention on Consent to Marriage, Minimum Age for Marriage and Registration of Marriages](#) and regional instruments such as the [African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child](#). In most countries, the minimum marriage age is 18. However, even though only six countries do not specify a minimum age for marriage in their legislation, no less than [117 others have exemptions](#) to this rule. Actually, effectively tackling this practice goes beyond law-making: [two-thirds of child marriages](#) take place in countries where the practice is forbidden, [poor law enforcement](#) being due to weak governmental or judicial structures or lack of measures addressing the root causes. The elimination of child marriage by 2030 is part of the UN Sustainable Development Goals ([target 5.3](#)). However, progress so far has been insufficient to reach this target: at best, [in 2030, 50 million](#) women aged 20-24 would still have been married before 18. Often, parents who marry their young daughters off had gone through the same experience themselves, and [seeing this tradition as 'bad'](#) would mean admitting to having spent their lives as victims. There is no 'one-size fits all' solution, and it is [difficult to assess](#) what are the most efficient actions: a change in mind-set can only be driven by long-term, [multi-pronged](#) programmes. Improving access to [education, health services](#) and job opportunities for both genders has to be coupled with awareness-raising, targeting not only girls but also decision-makers such as religious authorities and parents. Protecting girls who flee marriage, and [engaging men and boys](#) in efforts to eliminate the phenomenon are also key to success.

## EU action to help third countries combat child marriage

Child marriage is also an issue [in some Member States](#) and the signing of the [Istanbul Convention](#), which calls for criminalising the act of forcing a child to enter into marriage, [has been a long process](#). However, in third countries, the EU has long been involved in fighting against child marriage. Together with the UN, the EU has launched a gender initiative, '[Spotlight](#)', to address harmful practices such as child marriage. Ending child marriage is considered a priority in the [2015-2019 Action plan on human rights and democracy](#), the EU [Gender action plan for 2016-2020](#) and the [EU Strategic engagement to gender equality 2016-2019](#). As part of its diplomatic action, the EU advocates the transposition into national law of the obligations under international conventions to which partner countries are parties, and the enforcement of such legislation where it exists. Aid to tackle this practice is channelled by various means: the EU contribution to the [UNFPA- Unicef Global programme](#) to accelerate action to end child marriage ([€6 million](#)); support to civil society organisations working on this issue ([€18 million](#) to 'tackle harmful practices such as FGM and child marriage' over the 2014-2020 period) and other programmes dedicated to women's empowerment and to better access to health services and education.

Members of the **European Parliament** will again voice concern over the issue during the [European Development Days 2018](#), as Parliament has done in plenary sittings through resolutions and questions to the Commission. It has also pointed out the case of [married minors among the refugees](#) and asylum-seekers in EU Member States. Parliament acknowledges the key role of the EU in [improving the lives of girls and women](#) in third countries, and is due to vote in July on a report calling for an EU external strategy against early and forced marriage ([2017/2275\(INI\)](#)), which would commit both the EU and its partner countries.

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